

# U.S. education secretary visits school in New Orleans

NEW ORLEANS -The St. Peter Claver seventh-grade students were studying heredity and genetics when U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings dropped in for a visit Jan. 31. Teacher Rachel Pleis was using M&M candies in different colors to emphasize her points.

After listening to the students answer questions from the teacher and asking a few of her own, Spellings moved on with her group, which included Ursuline Sister Kathleen Finnerty, New Orleans archdiocesan school superintendent, and New Orleans Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes.

But, Spellings confided later to a school assembly that she didn't leave empty-handed. "I got a few M&Ms when I left that classroom," she said.

Spellings' visit to the New Orleans Catholic school was part of a trip to Louisiana that included an earlier stop in Baton Rouge.

She said when she learned Catholic Schools Week was Jan. 27-Feb. 2, "I knew I had to go to New Orleans. This is the embodiment of what Catholic education is all about."

Spellings talked about the money that was poured into education after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city and the schools in August 2005.

The government was working to channel millions into getting education back up and running, but, Spellings pointed out, the Catholic schools didn't wait for the money. "They figured they had to get the schools open and the kids back at work - and they'd figure out the money later."

"If that isn't a great example of service and faith," she said, "I don't know what is."

She called Catholic schools "little treasures," and said that was one reason why it was so great that in his State of the Union address Jan. 28 President George W. Bush

announced he would be convening a White House conference this spring on faith-based schools in cities.

“We need to cherish and nourish our faith-based schools, because, in particular, without them an inner-city education would be even harder for these children,” she added.

Spellings, who is not Catholic, sends her daughter to a Catholic school, and she said she is convinced Catholic schools provide “a great education with a student more likely to go on to college and grow up to be a wonderful human being.”

“We need to elevate the issue of how important Catholic schools are to this country,” she said.

Sister Kathleen thanked Spellings for her visit and her interest in Catholic schools, and especially for making sure that Catholic schools shared in the federal No Child Left Behind program.

Aimed at improving public schools, the program enables private schools to provide tutoring during nonschool hours for students in failing public schools. School districts pay for tutoring programs through federally allocated funds.

Archbishop Hughes said the secretary’s visit not only honored St. Peter Claver School but also the Archdiocese of New Orleans. He, too, said he hoped the White House summit on inner-city schools this spring can “help all of us ensure that city schools stay open and thrive.”